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SUBJECT: MINISTERS OF ENVIRONMENT, SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY,
AND HEALTH: NEW FACES ON ISRAEL'S ESTH SCENE

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Israel's new government under Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was sworn in last week with the largest cabinet in Israel's history. Gilad Erdan of Likud was appointed to the Ministry of Environmental Protection, and he appears to be taking an activist stance early in his tenure. Technion Professor Daniel Hershkowitz, Chairman of the Jewish Home Party, was named head of the new Ministry of Science and Technology, which was split off from the former Ministry of Science, Culture, and Sport. No Minister of Health was named; instead Ya'acov Litzman of United Torah Judaism (UTJ) was appointed Deputy Minister of Health with most of the authority of a full-fledged minister, but he will not sit in the prime minister's cabinet. The Israel Medical Association has appealed this decision to the High Court of Justice. End Summary.

HIGH HOPES FOR NEW ENVIRONMENT MINISTER

¶2. (SBU) MK Gilad Erdan (Likud) was appointed to head the Ministry of Environmental Protection with widespread approval from Knesset members and environmentalists alike. Erdan has previously received recognition from the Israel Union for Environmental Defense, and was co-recipient of a Green Globe Award from Life and Environment, Israel's umbrella organization of environmental NGOs, for his support for "green" legislation. At 38, Erdan is a young minister and is expected to inject some youthful energy into the ministry as he tries to effect a "green revolution". A Knesset member since 2003, he served in the environmental lobby of the 16th Knesset and as member of the social-environmental lobby in the 17th. He is a lawyer by profession, and has spent most of his career in government service. In the past Erdan supported legislation to fight air pollution, build bicycle paths along roadways, impose helmet regulations, and promote alternative energy. His strong position within Likud--he earned the third slot on the party's list in the February 2009 elections--will help him fight for the budget required to achieve his Ministry's goals. The Ministry of Environmental Protection has historically been hamstrung by budget constraints, and Erdan may face challenges in narrowing his focus to a subset of achievable goals rather than attempting to tackle all of the environmental issues in Israel.

¶3. (U) Erdan's first major act as environment minister was to issue a detailed objection to the planned construction of a new coal power plant in his hometown of Ashkelon, a port city south of Tel Aviv. He has called for the cabinet to immediately freeze the plans for the power plant, stating that it is unnecessary and counterproductive due to the recent discovery of a natural gas off of Israel's coast and

the likelihood that Israel will have to abide by a post-Kyoto protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions starting in 2012.

(Note: About 70 percent of Israel's electricity still comes from coal-fired plants, which constitute some of the country's major CO2 emissions sources.)

NEW SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY MINISTRY-A SIGN OF THE TIMES?

14. (SBU) The Science and Technology Ministry was separated from a larger ministry comprised of largely unrelated components, formerly known as the Ministry of Science, Culture, and Sport. Professor Daniel Hershkowitz, elected to the Knesset in February 2009 as Chairman of the Jewish Home Party, will head the new ministry. As a newcomer to the political scene, little is known about his plans or his readiness to serve as a minister. He is, however, a well-regarded professor of mathematics at the Technion, and is viewed as knowledgeable in the subject area if not as a seasoned politician. Although the splitting of this ministry probably was done to create more cabinet ministers for Netanyahu's coalition partners, it also could engender a commitment on the part of the incoming prime minister to the advancement of science and technology and bring welcome visibility to S&T issues in the new government.

UTJ TAKES THE HEALTH PORTFOLIO

15. (U) After a few days of back and forth over whether there would or would not be a full-fledged Minister of Health, and some additional political infighting in UTJ, MK Ya'acov Litzman has been appointed Deputy Minister of Health with no minister above him. This is the first time in Israel's 61-year history that the health portfolio will go without a

minister. UTJ has a policy dating back to 1953 of not serving in the cabinet because it does not want to participate in any decisions that contravene halacha, or Jewish religious law. According to the agreement, Litzman will have most of the authority of a full minister but will not be a member of the cabinet. The Israeli Medical Association (IMA) has opposed this decision and filed a petition to the High Court of Justice against the prime minister and his government. IMA maintains that the failure to appoint a cabinet-level person is "illegal and unreasonable" due to the size and complexity of Israel's third largest ministry. Their lawyers state that a deputy minister does not have the power to carry out major reforms, sign important regulations, sit on the ministerial committee for legislation, or present private bills. The High Court has agreed to hear the case by the end of the month but will not impose a temporary injunction as requested by IMA.

16. (U) Ya'acov Litzman has been a member of the Knesset since 1999, where he has twice been Chairman of the Finance Committee in addition to being a member of various other committees including Labor, Welfare, and Health; Internal Affairs and Environment; Joint Committee for the Defense Budget; State Control; and Science and Technology. He, along with many others, considered himself more suited to assume the role of Deputy Minister of Finance. However, that designation was already allotted to Ya'acov Cohen of Shas, and Litzman was unable to broker a deal with the prime minister to swap portfolios. He is highly regarded in the political establishment and is considered to have great organizational and managerial abilities. He announced that he agreed to accept the position because doctors and health officials pressured him to accept it, believing his experience as former head of the Finance Committee has given him the experience necessary to help stabilize the health system while dealing with cost overruns.

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